

Aerosmith continues to dream on after 27 years in rock

By Bob Tremblay
CNC STAFF WRITER

Rare is the rock 'n' roll band that can keep rockin' for more than 27 years. Rarer still is the rock 'n' roll band that breaks up, gets back together and not only keeps rockin' but arguably rocks with more vigor than before.

Perhaps this explains why Aerosmith belongs in the rock 'n' roll pantheon and why its fans keep rockin' with the band. The New England-born group performs at the Great Woods Center for the Performing Arts in Mansfield July 11 and 12.

Asked to explain the secret of its long-term success, Aerosmith guitarist Brad Whitford has no definitive answer. If one existed, there would probably be more bands like Aerosmith. "We're not quite sure why or what the recipe (for success) is. We're mystified by it ourselves," says Whitford during a recent phone interview from his South Shore home. "We're big fans of the music, too. We keep showing up like our audience does. We're the five biggest fans of Aerosmith."

The synergy the band creates with its audience may provide a clue to its popularity and longevity. It's something Aerosmith has worked hard at developing since its genesis in Sunapee, N.H., in 1970. "Our first album wasn't a success," says Whitford. "We were almost over before we started. Our manager at the time pulled some strings and we got a second record, which the record company didn't want to release. It sold 40,000 copies in Boston. The rest of the country didn't know us."



Aerosmith sandblasts through the concert.

Photo by Steve Tackeff

With no MTV around to spread the message, Aerosmith's task was to get its New England fan base, a.k.a. the Aerosmith Army, rolling to the rest of the country. The band accomplished the task the old-fashioned way: it earned it. "We played everywhere non-stop for seven or eight years," says Whitford, who just returned home with the band following a six-week European tour. "And it paid off. We got into people's bloodlines. The old fans are fans for life."

The years of touring helped create this devoted following. It also, however, contributed to the band's schism. "By 1979, we were really burnt out," says Whitford. "We were working way too hard. And the '70s lifestyle didn't help at all. The drug culture was the way of the day. Every night was a party and you can't do that for too long. Pretty soon the pressure of work and the lifestyle erupted. No one said, 'Take a break. Let's get healthy and strong again and then come back.' Instead, it was either stay or go. There was no in between."

Guitarist Joe Perry was the first to go, departing in 1979 to eventually form the Joe Perry Project. Vocalist Steven Tyler was injured in a motorcycle accident. Then Whitford left in 1980. "It had all come to a grinding halt," he says. "I got frustrated. We weren't doing anything."

Whitford worked solo and with Joe Perry, but nothing clicked as it had with Aerosmith. "We had to try to make this work," Whitford says. Unfortunately, Tyler and Perry "weren't talking to each other (at the time). It was over silly things. It's the psychology of working in a small group. It's bizarre. It can bring out the best and worst in people. Egos get in the way. You say, 'I don't need you.'"

Egos eventually gave in when it became apparent the original band members did need each other. "We said it can work again when we get together," says Whitford. They reunited in 1984. "We wanted to give it an honest try. We were not really happy with what was happening. We had to take a hard look at the way we did things."

One thing the group did was expand its musical horizons beyond the narrow confines of guitar-dominated rock. "We wanted to make the music more interesting to the listener," says Whitford. The group had earlier songs, such as its first big hit, "Dream On," that fit into this category, but "we wanted to shake it up more."

Whitford began playing the guitar at 14, falling under the spell cast by the Beatles-influenced British Invasion. Then along came Jimi Hendrix. "I'm still infatuated by his music," says Whitford. "I saw him play live twice at the Boston Garden. His playing was awe-inspiring. It was so new, so different. He was such a showman. He was having fun. And that's what rock is supposed to be: fun. We're not terribly dark either. Our music has a lot of tongue-in-cheek humor in it, too."

After graduating from Reading High School in 1970, Whitford refined his technique at the Berklee College of Music. During a summer break, he played guitar with friends in Nantucket before hooking up with Aerosmith in New Hampshire in 1971. "The nucleus started a year earlier in Sunapee with Joe and Steve, who had summer homes there and (bassist) Tom (Hamilton) lived there," says Whitford. "A guy in the band didn't work out and they asked me to join. It was the best thing going at the time and they were way above average players, so I said yes."

Drummer Joey Kramer takes credit for the group's name. "He said he dreamed it up and that it didn't come from the book 'Aerosmith,'" says a skeptical Whitford.

The guitarist continues to enjoy performing and recording. "It's like riding a motorcycle and the wind's in your face," he says

of the former. The latter he calls an escape valve for creativity.

One aspect of rock Whitford could do without is the travel. "That gets old real fast," he says. "It's a strange lifestyle. It's 4 a.m. and you're a zombie. I envy people who get home by 5 every night. We all have families, too, so we try to balance it all and give time for everybody."

Whitford is married and has three children; he prefers to keep his family life private. Though people have showed up on his driveway, he says the majority of Aerosmith fans have not been a problem. "Most of the people just want to say, 'Hi.' They want that exchange and I can understand it."

One current group Whitford enjoys is the Stone Temple Pilots. "They're spellbinding. I just hope (lead singer) Scott Weiland can get over his drug problems." Aerosmith itself is now drug-free, Whitford says. "We had our share," he admits.

Fans wanting to know more about the group can purchase a book of interviews, called "Walk This Way" and scheduled to be released in the fall.

Whether the band dominates the charts or not, "there will always be a place for Aerosmith," says Whitford. Simply put, the band can still rock. "We know how to do it," he says. "The music is so much a part of us. It's timeless. It's ageless."

"If you like it, why give it up? We don't want to let the dream die," concludes the 45-year-old Whitford. "It began as a dream that turned into a reality. We feel responsible for this dream. We can't walk away from it. There are so many challenges left."

Aerosmith plays Great Woods Center for the Performing Arts in Mansfield July 11 and 12. For ticket information, call (617) 423-NEXT.